

I attributed Alan's bizarre ideas to his reading of ancient literature, and had tried to sound cynical, but in truth it became annoying to find that his fantasies had begun to affect my involuntary perceptions. On entering the Bell I would experience, first a dead stillness, and then the shivery feeling of a ghostly crowd. Out of the corner of my eye I repeatedly glimpsed people attired in all manner of costume, only to have them vanish when I looked directly. To remind myself that I was a victim of suggestion should have been enough to dispel the apparitions; but it did not. Alan had been too clever for me.

The sun was once more a pathless wanderer when I next came in to find him alone. There is something about a nearly empty pub which invites one to move on, and we discussed this possibility as I drank my first pint.

Normally we would have had to take a long walk. Instead, a brave proposal came to my mind.

"Let's see if the Wendy House is any better."

He agreed, but reluctantly, I thought, and was slow to empty his glass. At length we stepped outside. The light now had that limpid quality which it gains just before it begins to fade. There was no hint of a breeze.

The rough track which connects the Bell to the road also joins, near to the pub, a narrow paved path which strikes off at a right angle. Its further side is lined by a stand of tall poplars, its near side by a ten-foot-tall link-wire fence. A little way along it a second path strikes off to the right, again at a right angle, and is guarded by a wire-mesh gate. This second path runs dead straight for a considerable distance, and ends finally at the bowling green and adjoining clubhouse. The complexity of the access had emphasized the club's remoteness in my mind, though to others it is probably perfectly straightforward. I headed unthinkingly towards the first path, only to have Alan pluck at my sleeve.

"Not that way. Over here."

He led me through the screen of beech trees and round the corner of the building. There, a lane leads away into the countryside and out of Donnington altogether, petering out eventually among the old slag-heaps which now have become marshy and overgrown with all kinds of wild plant, creating a wilderness of interest, I had always thought, to a naturalist. Neither poplars nor beeches enclose this lane, but high hedges of privet interwoven with hawthorn, so that one can see nothing of the surroundings. We walked a few yards and then Alan stopped and carefully examined the hedge to our left. For a moment he seemed uncertain, but then located what he was looking for. He inserted an arm, pushed through, and disappeared.

He had found what was a weakness, rather than a gap, in the otherwise impenetrable hedge, which was luckily free of thorns at this point. Had he known of its existence from the beginning? Was this how he had been able to enter the clubhouse unaccompanied by a member? I followed, forcing myself through the green privet, and joined him on the other side.

A long grassy paddock lay before us, bounded on the further side by the gated path. And there, in the far corner, stood the wooden shack of the clubhouse.

A silly thought occurred to me. *We shouldn't be able to get in at all. It's a Wendy House.* Then the

sense of the adventure took hold. "Here we go, then," I said, and stepped out, soft grass under my shoes.

After a few moments I sensed an absence, and turned. Alan was no longer there. He had deserted me and gone back.

I shrugged. It was not the first time I had experienced this particular aspect of his eccentricity. Once, we had agreed to take half an hour's walk to a pub in another district. After only a few minutes there, irritated by some imagined slight, or else in a neurotic mood, he had simply walked off.

Unwilling to be cheated of my journey into the unknown, I continued, and soon could see the meticulously tended bowling green, on which no one was playing. There was no one at all in sight, and the clubhouse was perched solitary and silent. I walked round it and found a closed door. Feeling strongly like an interloper, I turned the knob, pushed, and stepped cautiously inside.

What a feeling of vacancy there was in the Wendy House! I saw a long narrow room, fitted with tables and chairs along the sides. At one end was the bar. There, three or four blank, nondescript faces turned towards me as I stood nervously, carefully closing the door at my back.

It did not signify anything to me at the time that I could not identify any of those faces as belonging to the local community. Being a timber hut and not a brick pub, the clubhouse had smaller windows, and what light entered lent the room a fading air. The atmosphere had exactly that mystique which my imagination had bestowed upon it when Alan had made his earlier visit. For some reason this failed to frighten me. It seemed inevitable, like the closing phrase of a melody.

Although I was clearly a stranger no one challenged my presence; but in one respect my experience differed from Alan's. A book was produced which I was asked to sign, while someone else wrote his name in the members' column. I paid the twenty pence visitor's fee, and bought a drink.

To stand at the bar in dead silence, with no one speaking, made me feel uncomfortable. After a minute or two I walked down the room to sit at a table, intending to use the perspective to gain a good view of the room. As soon as my back was turned on the bar the shivery crowd sensation I had felt in the Bell returned, but more ethereal. It was like being brushed with something very soft.

As I took my seat the sensation vanished. Through one of the small windows the reddened sun suddenly poured itself liquidly from between streaks of coloured cloud where it had sauntered unseen. Momentarily I was dazzled. When my vision cleared I noticed, for the first time, a book lying on the adjacent table. Its title riveted my attention immediately:

#### **The Book of Science-Fiction Writers**

A garish rocketship cover, probably borrowed from one of the old pulp magazines, glared out. I picked the book up, savoured the cover, then opened it and soon immersed myself in its contents.

In a preface the editors claimed their survey to be comprehensive from the turn of the century on. Every published author was given a critical appraisal – long or short, as merited – in alphabetical order, and a

go back and forth. People who are very angry, or prone to some other negative emotion either through conditioning or their own nature, can't seem to pierce that veil. They become embarrassed. I've seen that time and again when I've worked with aspiring writers. You say to them, 'Imagine a character coming into the room. What does the character do?' And they say, 'Oh, I can't do that, it's silly,' and turn red and get self-conscious. But you have to live with that kind of embarrassment in order to let the material come out."

Kerr's interest in myth and fable began in her childhood. "It really goes back to about age eleven, when a kindly relative gave me *The Child's Book of King Arthur*. It had lots of brightly-coloured pictures, and I was fascinated by the stories. We were living in Santa Barbara, southern California, which had a minuscule library, and I began haunting it at that point. I learned everything I could about King Arthur, and that leads inevitably to the whole of Celtic history, which I became very interested in as a teenager. Of course that was long before Tolkien's books were published in the United States. I read those when I was about twenty, in 1965 I think, in the bootleg paperbacks. I remember I sat up all night and read all three of them in one go.

"He is the master, of course. Everything he does, he does brilliantly. The only thing he doesn't do is write about real women, but what can you expect from an Oxford don? But, even as a feminist, I can't hold that against him because his books are wonderful. You don't expect somebody to do something they say they're not going to do. I can certainly accept that.

"Tolkien was very strong in his Christian faith and he projected that. He was an Anglo-Catholic. I was raised a Presbyterian myself, which is a horrifying thing to do to a child, and I got out of it as soon as I could. I mean, telling anybody about predestination when they're only five or six years old is really child abuse."

Tolkien's influence is so all-embracing that anyone else writing fantasy is almost automatically



Katharine Kerr

compared with him. Does she find this irksome? "Oh, of course. But the thing that irritates me most is when people say, 'Tolkien invented elves.' Tolkien would have been furious at that. He saw himself as a synthesizer of northern European (Scandinavian) mythology into a new mode. And that's exactly what he was.

"What's interesting about this is that every European culture has some form of the legend about beings who were there before us. You know, the little men who lived in the mountains; sometimes the large men who lived in the mountains. Or the wise elves. These are found in all European mythologies, stretching on into Russia.

"What if these elves, dwarves and giants are a kernel of folk memory, a story carried on from camp fire to camp fire over 30,000 or 40,000 years? 40,000 years is nothing in biological terms. So it's quite possible that this little kernel of a story about people who were there before us has been 'golden-aged'; you know, turned into the wonderful past instead of, 'They were people like us, probably.'"

Kerr's first published work appeared in the gaming world, starting with features and going on to game scenarios, the best known probably being *Legacy of Blood*. "Gaming may well have had some influence on my fiction," she says, "but not in any direct way. My fiction is not gaming-style fiction, if you know what I mean. I don't mean to disparage gaming-style fiction by saying that, I'm just making a distinction. I really do enjoy gaming, and I suppose it has some tie-in with fiction in that you learn how to plan a world and to think in advance. But of course your fictional characters are so much more malleable than players. They do what you want. To some extent anyway!

"I always wanted to be a writer, and the first thing I wrote was a straight historical novel set in California in World War One, called *Catch the Shadows* (about Hollywood's silent-movie era). On the strength of that I got an agent, and she sent it to a lot of editors, all of whom loved it, but none of whom bought it because they